

CHAPTER NINE

A STUDY OF PARENT—CHILD SEPARATION IN ACCRA

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Introduction

This study was designed to answer the very simple but important question of whether children live with their parents in the same home and if not, with which other categories of relatives or non-relatives do they live, and the reasons for such family arrangements. It should therefore be viewed simply as a factual and exploratory study which does not, at least at this stage, seek to formulate any hypotheses or test any theories.

The study is part of a larger study of the effects of urbanisation and migration on family formation and structure which was conducted between 1971 and 1972 in a sample of 428 houses comprising about 1337 households in Accra. For the purpose of the study, Accra was divided into four main ecological zones on the basis of socio-economic homogeneity, as follows:

Group I comprises the visibly more affluent and higher socio-economic suburbs such as the Airport, Cantonments and North Labone Residential Areas.

Group II areas have a relatively long history of settlement and contain a high proportion of non-migrants, i.e. Gas. These areas are Korle Bu, James Town and Osu. Other traditional areas like Labadi, Teshie and Nungua were excluded from the sample for various methodological and economic reasons.

Group III comprises the relatively lower but mixed residential areas such as Adabraka, Kokomlemle, Kaneshie, Abossey Okai, Kotobabi and Manprobi.

Group IV comprises the relatively poorly planned and overcrowded suburbs of Accra which are inhabited mainly by migrant workers of low socio-economic status. These areas are Sabon Zongo and Nima.

Reasons for Study

One of the major reasons for asking the question about where children are living is that psychological theories of socialisation and child development assert that the presence of both a father and mother in the conjugal home is essential for the proper development of the growing child. According to these theories, parents serve two main functions for the growing child. Firstly, they serve as models for the child to imitate and the roles and behaviorus which parents exhibit constitute some of the major sources of information about appropriate or approved behaviour both within the small family and the wider society at large. The young boy's adoption of an appropriate masculine role, for example, is largely the result of the regular intimate contacts with

the father; similarly, the girl's acceptance of the female role hinges largely on regular inter-action with her mother.

The second way in which parents help in child development is more direct and positive, and that is by the judicious use of parental authority, backed by a wide range of sanctions, it ensure internalisation of the proper modes of thought and patterns of behaviour appropriate for that particular group or society.

One obvious implication of these psychological propositions is that children who grow up without the benefit of one or both parents tend to suffer certain deficiencies in their personality development especially where effective substitutes are not available. Indeed, in contemporary western society where the residential nuclear family of father, mother and child is the norm, there is considerable documentary evidence, based on the work of child psychologists and social welfare workers, to attest to the adverse effects of father or mother absence on the growing child. All these studies tend to confirm the basic thesis that some kind of psychological and even sometimes physiological impairment is suffered by the growing child who misses one or both parents at certain crucial periods in his development. For example, Hetherington.* found that preadolescent boys whose fathers had left home in the first four years of life grew up to be generally less aggressive, tended to have more feminine preferences and lacked a competitive spirit. Other studies have shown father-absence to be associated with a wide range of various forms of inappropriate behaviour such as pronounced mother-dependence, difficulty in getting along with peers, lack of motivation and delinquent habits.

It should be conceded however that these studies have been done mainly in western society where family and residential arrangements are such that in the case of father or mother absence, there are often no adequate substitutes for the parental roles. In contemporary Ghanaian society the extended kinship system and the large compound residential arrangement still prevalent in most parts of the country imply that the presence of parents may not be a crucial loss for the development of an integrated personality structure since substitutes may exist in the form of the mother's brother, the father's brother or grandparents, for example. But even where this is the case, it is necessary to ask whether the different forms of fostering or child-rearing practices have any important implications for personality development. In other words, one may ask, in what ways the personality structure of the child reared and socialised by both parents differ from that of the child brought up by the mother alone, or by the grandparents or another relative. The institutionalised role which each of these categories of persons performs vis-a-vis the child is fundamentally different and may never really substitute for the other. It has noted, for example, that "in Africa generally, there is a marked condition of restraint on the behaviour of children in the presence of their parents . . . but grandparents are more indulgent towards their grandchildren . . . and there is a widespread custom of privileged familiarity between grandchildren and grandparents."² There are also significant differences from ethnic group to group with regard to where the child actually lives or who has more direct control or influence over him in his formative years.

Traditional Patterns

The practice of allowing growing children to be reared by persons other than their own parents is very old in Ghana. It stems partly from certain institutional arrangements and customary practices whose origins go far back into history. Among the Gas, for example, husbands do not traditionally live with their wives in the same compound or house. This means

that the growing child alternates between the paternal and maternal homes at different stages in his life. In case of the Akans, the growing child may never come under the authority or influence of the father till late adolescence, and even amongst societies where neolocal residence permitted parents to have direct control over their children, the latter may often be given out to other relatives or families for various reasons.

Children were often given out at very tender ages to serve as domestics in other households either to pay family debts or as traditional obligations to a politically or socially superior family or a chief. Children were also sometimes offered to certain shrines or gods either as a religious duty or to avoid witchcraft or certain taboos. It was also not uncommon for even the sons of powerful chiefs to be sent at tender ages to other princely families elsewhere for training, education, or in fulfilment of certain traditional obligations between chiefdoms.

Modern Influences

In addition to these traditional practices which still seem to persist to a significant degree, certain modern influences such as migration and urbanisation appear to have encouraged a greater degree of child dispersion. Unsure of their prospects in the new area of settlement, many migrants prefer, at least in the initial stages, to leave their wives and children behind in the care of brothers, sisters, parents or other relatives until they can decide what kind of arrangement is best suited for the whole family. A major factor here is the desire not to sever roots from the village or to disturb existing school arrangements for the children.

Other parents deliberately send their children to live with more prosperous or educated relatives in the hope that the children may gain access to some of the modern opportunities or facilities which they have no hope of ever providing for them. Still other parents regard their children primarily as sources of pecuniary gain, and send them out at tender ages to work as domestics in the homes of the elite. In modern Ghana it seems as if traditional practices have assumed new forms and are just as pervasive as ever.

Where do Children Live?

Table 1 gives a general distribution of the number of respondents who have children living outside the parental home by major residential or socio-economic area. But before discussing the main findings of the survey, a few preliminary remarks are necessary to clarify certain aspects of the findings. Firstly, owing to the wide variation in marital and residential patterns, respondents were interviewed as individuals rather than as couples. This means that it is possible for a child to be listed by both the father and the mother as living elsewhere. Although this approach is not methodically very satisfactory, it was thought necessary in view of the rather complex and fluid nature of urban marital relationships. Secondly, though our interest is in relatively "younger" children, the generality of the question meant that children of all age categories were included. It can be noted in the table that, of the total number of 1380 respondents in the sample who had children, more than half (54.2 per cent) had at least one child living elsewhere outside the parental home. Of these 19.1 per cent had only one child living elsewhere, 14.1 per cent had two and 13.0 per cent had four or more children living elsewhere. The major conclusion therefore is that child dispersion is quite pronounced in Accra.

Another important feature, shown in the table is that men generally tend to be separated from their offspring much more often than mothers. As many as 63.1 per cent of all fathers

TABLE 1

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN LIVING ELSEWHERE BY AGE, MAJOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC AREA AND
SEX OF PARENT

Major Socio-Economic Area	Sex	Total Abso- lute Num- bers	Percentage of Children Living Elsewhere by Age										
			0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9 or more	No Infor- mation
TOTAL	M	1380	45.8	19.1	14.1	7.6	5.9	3.0	2.1	0.6	0.5	0.9	0.4
All Groups	F	705	36.9	19.4	16.2	9.4	6.8	4.2	3.3	1.0	0.8	1.6	0.4
		675	55.1	18.7	11.9	5.8	5.0	1.8	0.9	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.4
GROUP I:	M	70	60.0	22.8	5.7	2.9	2.9	—	1.4	1.4	—	—	2.9
Airport/Cantonments	F	33	48.5	24.2	6.1	6.1	6.1	—	3.0	3.0	—	—	3.0
		37	70.3	21.6	5.4	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	2.7
GROUP II:	M	290	39.3	16.2	14.8	10.0	7.9	5.9	2.8	1.0	0.7	1.4	—
Accra Central Traditional Area	F	131	29.0	16.8	17.6	11.5	7.6	7.6	3.8	1.5	1.5	3.1	—
		159	47.8	15.7	12.6	8.8	8.2	4.4	1.9	0.6	—	—	—
GROUP III:	M	533	46.0	17.8	16.5	7.3	5.4	2.6	2.3	0.2	0.6	0.9	0.4
Abossey Okai/Manprobi/Ada- braka, etc.	F	275	38.2	17.4	18.5	8.4	6.9	3.6	3.3	0.4	1.1	1.8	0.4
		258	54.3	18.2	14.3	6.1	3.9	1.5	1.2	—	—	—	0.4
GROUP IV:	M	487	47.4	21.6	12.1	7.2	5.8	2.3	1.6	0.6	0.4	0.6	0.4
Nima/Sabon Zongo	F	266	38.0	22.2	14.3	9.8	6.4	3.7	3.0	1.1	0.4	0.7	0.4
		221	58.8	20.8	9.5	4.1	5.0	0.4	—	—	0.4	0.5	0.5

in the sample had at least one child living elsewhere compared to only 44.9 per cent of mothers. This general picture is consistently duplicated in all the major socio-economic areas of Accra, though with some variations.

I think the main reason for the greater father-child separation is the fact that marriages (even serial ones) are generally frowned upon for women, yet very little social stigma seems to be attached to the practice of a man having one or two children with different partners before entering into a formal union or even after marriage. This obviously encourages the separation of such children from the father.

Another significant features of the data is that there are some slight differences with respect to socio-economic group or major area of residence. Parents staying at the relatively well-to-do areas (Group I) are less likely to have a child living elsewhere (40 per cent) than parents in any of the other areas. The case of Group II is particularly revealing since it contains a high proportion of members of the Ga ethnic group. It is possible that the traditional Ga practice of maintaining separate residence for spouses is still very strong and may account for the high degree of separation (70.7 per cent). Additional evidence to support this conclusion is the fact that almost one-fifth of the respondents in these areas had as many as four children living elsewhere.

Age Distribution of Children Living Elsewhere

Table II gives a distribution of the children living elsewhere by age and major residential or socio-economic area. Of the total number 19.8 per cent were aged 20 years or over. Since this total may include a number of children who have set up independent households either because they are employed or married—and this is supported by the large proportion of females (24.6 per cent) in this group—we have to ignore them in our study in spite of their numerical importance. Again the proportion of children living elsewhere whose ages were not known or indicated was also quite large (14.2 per cent). In spite of these weaknesses, certain broad conclusions can be drawn about the age structure of the dispersed children.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the age distribution is the evenness of the distribution or the fact that children of all age categories are involved in the separation from parents. Of the total number of children involved in the separation, 16.6 per cent are aged under 5 years, 23.2 per cent between the ages of 5 and 9, 15.0 per cent between ages 10 and 14, and 11.2 per cent between 15 and 19 years of age. Thus age does not seem to be a significant factor in determining the likelihood of a child being separated or not. Obviously other socio-cultural factors are more pertinent in determining separation.

With Whom do the Children Stay?

One fact which emerged quite clearly on the question “with whom do the children stay?” is the high proportion of husbands or wives who do not live in the same house or locality with their spouses (see Table 3). This lack of common residence accounts to a great extent for the separation of children from either or both parents. As many as 31.6 per cent of the children living elsewhere were reported to be staying with one parent (i.e. either the father or the mother), but much more often with the mother owing to reasons given earlier in this discussion.

The next most important category of relatives with whom children stay are their grand parents. As many as 25.4 per cent of the children are staying or living with their grandparents. What is surprising, however, is the fact that only a significant proportion (11.9 per cent) are

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN LIVING ELSEWHERE BY AGE, MAJOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC AREA AND SEX OF PARENT

Major Socio-Economic Area	Sex	Total Absolute Number	Age of Children Living Elsewhere																	No information	Under 20	Under 20 and no information
			00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15-19	20+			
TOTAL: ...	...	1636	2.6	1.9	3.9	3.8	4.4	5.1	5.3	4.2	5.3	3.3	3.7	2.4	2.9	3.0	3.0	11.2	19.8	14.2	66.0	80.2
ALL GROUPS	M	1064	3.4	2.8	5.4	4.7	5.3	5.8	5.1	4.7	5.4	3.6	3.8	2.2	3.4	2.6	2.6	10.2	17.0	12.0	71.0	83.0
	F	622	1.3	0.5	1.5	2.4	2.9	3.9	5.6	3.4	5.0	2.7	3.5	2.7	2.1	3.5	3.7	12.9	24.6	17.8	57.6	75.4
GROUP 1: ...	...	50	2.0	—	2.0	2.0	2.0	2.0	8.0	—	6.0	—	4.0	4.0	2.0	6.0	6.0	30.0	8.0	16.0	76.0	92.0
Airport/Cantonments	M	34	2.9	—	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	8.8	—	5.9	—	3.0	—	3.0	5.9	5.9	29.4	11.8	11.8	76.4	88.2
	F	16	—	—	—	—	—	—	6.3	—	6.3	—	6.2	12.5	—	6.2	6.2	31.3	—	25.0	75.0	100.0
GROUP 2: ...	...	448	2.5	0.7	2.2	2.5	1.6	3.8	2.0	2.5	4.7	2.7	2.7	2.9	2.9	4.0	2.9	12.5	25.9	21.0	53.1	74.1
Accra Central	M	246	3.3	1.2	3.3	3.3	2.8	5.3	0.8	2.0	5.3	2.8	2.0	3.3	3.7	4.5	2.8	13.0	19.9	20.7	59.4	80.1
Traditional Area	F	202	1.5	—	1.0	1.5	0.5	2.0	3.4	3.0	3.9	2.5	3.4	2.5	2.0	3.4	3.0	11.9	33.2	21.3	45.5	66.8
GROUP 3: ...	...	645	2.9	2.0	4.8	4.8	4.8	5.3	6.8	5.0	4.6	2.8	3.4	3.3	2.2	3.1	2.6	10.9	23.9	6.8	69.3	76.1
Abossey Okai etc.	M	408	3.4	3.0	6.3	5.4	5.2	6.1	6.9	5.4	3.3	3.4	3.4	2.9	2.9	2.2	2.5	8.1	22.3	6.1	71.6	77.7
	F	237	2.1	0.4	1.3	3.8	4.2	3.8	6.8	4.2	5.9	1.7	3.4	3.8	0.8	4.6	3.0	15.6	26.6	8.0	65.4	73.4
GROUP 4: ...	...	543	2.4	3.1	4.4	4.0	6.3	6.3	5.9	5.2	6.4	4.6	4.8	0.7	3.9	1.7	3.3	8.8	11.1	17.1	71.8	88.9
Nima Sabon Zongo	M	376	3.5	4.0	5.3	5.1	7.2	6.1	5.6	6.1	7.2	4.5	5.3	0.8	3.7	1.6	2.4	9.0	9.8	12.8	77.4	90.2
	F	167	—	1.2	2.4	1.8	4.2	6.5	6.6	3.0	4.8	4.8	3.6	0.6	4.2	1.8	5.4	8.3	13.8	26.9	59.3	86.2

living on their own, presumably those above the age of 16. Another significant proportion (7.9 per cent) are either living with non-relatives or in institutions. Various categories of other relatives account for the rest.

The reasons given for the separation varied widely, but one significant fact which emerged here was that very few of the respondents regarded separation as a permanent measure. Many respondents stressed the fact that it was merely a temporary arrangement in the best interest of the child. The major reason given was related to the educational needs of the child. More than one-half of the respondents gave education as the main reason for favouring the separation of the child. Either they thought it better for children to live with their grandparents or other relatives and attend schools in their hometowns, they did not wish to disrupt the children's schooling by bringing them to Accra, or they had been able to obtain places in schools for them in Accra.

Some parents (about 12.3 per cent) stated quite simply that they were not in a position to look after the children themselves because of financial constraints, lack of accommodation or employment. A slightly smaller proportion of respondents (7.8 per cent) explained that they were no longer married to the fathers or mothers of their children. However, it was only in a very small minority of cases that the separation was the direct result of some kind of conflict between spouses or parents.

An attempt was also made in the interview to find out whether parents contributed financially towards the maintenance of their children. The results may be briefly summarised here. The major findings is that over one-half of the respondents (50.4 per cent) did not offer any regular monthly contribution towards their children's upkeep. About ten per cent of respondents regularly contributed 1 to 2 cedis a month; about 15 per cent contributed 3 to 4 cedis a month and about 10.5 per cent contributed 5 to 6 cedis a month, whilst the rest contributed various sums above 6 cedis a month. It should be emphasized, however, that mere monetary contribution should not be taken as the sole criterion of parental responsibility. Many respondents claimed that although they do not send money regularly they often send packages of food, clothing and other goods when visiting relatives or friends are returning home or when they themselves are going home on visits.

Conclusion

As already stated in the introduction, this study was not designed to test any particular hypothesis but rather to highlight certain questions or problems which could lead to more research and discussion. There are many important changes taking place in the structure and functions of the Ghanaian family as a result of industrialisation, urbanisation, education and so on. One area of such change which deserves more study is the position of children in our society.

This study has shown that the traditional practice of children being separated from their parents for certain periods and consequently being trained or socialised by various categories of relatives is still very much extant in our society though the reasons for this separation may be very different from the traditional ones. The sociological and psychological consequences of such separation are questions which deserve increased attention from social scientists interested in the fate of the family.



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